

WESTWOOD

Program offers keys to self-expression

BY MEGAN BURROW - Of Community Life

The children wriggled as they sat in a semicircle and shouted their guesses “He’s drinking something” one girl squealed from the side of the room. River, a little boy with a shaggy mop of hair and a wide smile, jumped up and ran back to the group.

Minutes later, the charades were over and the group was jumping through hula hoops, giggling as the teacher shouted instructions over the bouncy music played from a stereo in the back of the brightly lit room. Every Wednesday since the beginning of March the Westwood Recreation center has played host to dozens of children with disabilities learning how to dance, move, and play together, in a joint program between Westwood and the Township of Washington for local children with special needs.

Working with Margaret Koesel, the Washington Township Director of Recreation, and program coordinators Maria Montana and Michelle Stapleton, Westwood Recreation Director Gary Buchheister said he began the dance program early this spring after seeing the community’s profound need for more programs geared towards the special needs of children with disabilities. “We have lots of programs for a lot of different kids, but we had nothing special for special needs children. Their needs are unique.”

Rocco Santorufo, a dance instructor who runs the Westwood dance and performing arts programs, also owns a performing arts school, Broadway Bound Dance Center in Dumont, and told Buchheister he has worked with special needs children and was eager to help with the program. He volunteered to teach two classes a week on Wednesdays; one for younger children, ages 3 to 5, and a class geared towards children ages 6 and up.

The energetic Santorufo, a former child actor, dancer and singer, has offered a special needs program in Wayne, and said he hopes to work with other towns to offers similar classes for children with disabilities. His passion for the work shines when he is with the kids. Constantly moving, he claps along and encourages them as they do their best to follow his instructions. He said in the 20 years since he opened Broadway Bound, he worked with many special needs children, but began targeting the group specifically just a few years ago. “There was just a click,” he said, describing his first class. “To watch the expressions on their faces as they tried each new activity, it was an amazing feeling.”

During the class, each child has a “shadow,” a volunteer who closely supervises the child and helps them with the activities. Many of the shadows are local high school students. Kelly Martin, a Special Olympics athlete, volunteers each week with the dance program. She has competed in the Special Olympics since she was a teenager and acts as a “global messenger” on the group’s behalf, working to raise awareness of the importance of access to sports and activities regardless of ability.

At first Buchheister said he planned to offer the classes exclusively to Westwood and Washington Township residents, but as long as there is room, the program will be open to all local children. Since March, the program has attracted children from across the Pascack Valley, as well as New Milford and Old Tappan. For now, the program is free and run completely with the help of volunteers, but in the future, as costs rise, the department may charge a “nominal” fee, he

said. He said he is hoping within the next year to gain grants from the state to support the dance program and expand the department's special needs offerings to include arts and crafts, basketball, and yoga. The five-to-one matching grant would help pay for the eight week programs, which would run consecutively year round. Eventually Buchheister said he hopes to work with local sports groups to begin special needs little league and soccer teams.

Many parents pay large sums and drive to far-flung towns across the state and New York for their children to have an opportunity to participate in activities like the one being offered here, said Buchheister. It can be a burden on busy parents and on the children, who often attend schools out of district and may have few friends living nearby. "We really want to create something here and have these kids who live in these two towns to feel like they are part of the community".

Lynore D'Ambrosio, a Westwood resident and single mother of three, said she had trouble even finding the words to describe the impact the program has had on her 10-year-old son Thomas, who has autism. "It's just wonderful," she said. "He's learning how to follow instructions better and they're really patient with him. He just loves it." She said every time she drives down Jefferson Avenue with Thomas in the car he points to the recreation center and asks to go in. "Just him pointing it out as we pass the building was a huge step for him," she said.

New Jersey has one of the highest rates of autism in the country, yet there are few affordable after school activities for children with the disorder. A recent study released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that one out of every 94 children born in the state is on the spectrum. The numbers demonstrate just how great the need is for more programs geared toward children with disabilities, said Santorufo. "I believe the arts should be for everyone. Music is the key to expression; dance is the key to expression. Everybody loves music – it should be open to everybody."

For more information about the special needs dance program, call the Westwood Recreation Department at 201-664-7882.

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